

Healthy Parks Healthy People US

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Strategic *Action* Plan

November 2011

Healthy Parks Healthy People US: a holistic
approach to promoting the health and well-being
of all species and the planet we share.

Foreword

This Healthy Parks Healthy People US Strategic Action Plan is intended as a blueprint for illuminating and magnifying the power of the National Park System to promote health and well-being.

In September 2010, National Park Service Director Jon Jarvis established a National Park Service Health and Wellness Executive Steering Committee, with leadership from the National Park Service Office of Public Health. The charge of the committee was two-fold:

- 1 Explore the role of the National Park Service in promoting the health and well-being of the nation.
- 2 Recommend an institutional home and strategy to support health promotion.

We took a full year to seek information and inspiration in meeting both of these charges. On April 5–6, 2011, the Director hosted a Healthy Parks Healthy People US meeting in San Francisco to provide an opportunity for deep dialogue and discussion with a group of innovators, visionaries, and leaders with an interest in exploring how to strengthen the nexus of public lands and public health.

In this process, the steering committee discovered we are in the midst of a movement that has profound potential. We recognize this effort is not about the National Park Service, but rather how we can be a catalyst and lead by example to serve a broader cultural shift. Just as it took the wisdom and expertise of many people to inspire a Healthy Parks Healthy People movement, it will require collective resources and expertise to mobilize support to bring these ideas into fruition. At its heart, this plan is based on a foundation of collaboration, innovation, and partnership.

We wish to acknowledge that we can't begin to centrally conduct or manage all of the activities that must occur to keep the Healthy Parks Healthy People movement alive, nor is that the most effective approach. However, we can release the creativity and energy of individuals and help to encourage, nurture, and illuminate new ideas.

Presented herein is an ethos of public lands and public health, guiding principles, a vision, and a strategic framework in support of a five-year action plan to promote the health and well-being of all species and the planet we share. We see this as the beginning of a new era for parks to be rightfully recognized for their contributions to our nation's health. Together, we can strengthen a common well-being and change the world.

Sincerely,



Charles Higgins
Director, NPS Office of Public Health



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“Who will gainsay that the *parks* contain the highest potentialities of national pride, national contentment and *national health*?”

Stephen T. Mather
National Park Service Director
1917–1929

Public Health and Public Lands

The National Park Service has a long-standing tradition of addressing conservation needs and environmental concerns. Yet we are just now, as a society, beginning to renew our understanding that open space and the natural world are critical to our health as a species.

Historically, the impetus and justification for the creation of park land in the United States is rooted in public health. Our nation’s first parks (e.g., Hot Springs National Reserve, Central Park, and Yellowstone), were all established in the 1800s, during the City Beautiful Movement and the Conservation Movement, in response to the ill effects of the Industrial Revolution and overexploitation of natural resources. These parks were seen as a means of protecting resources while democratizing clean air, clean water, and outdoor enjoyment for the health and inspiration of all people.

Today, in the wake of the Information Technology Age, we are suffering from associated unhealthy lifestyle behaviors including physical inactivity and poor diet. There is an increasing disconnect between communities and natural environments that is contributing to health problems and chronic disease.^{i, ii} People of color and low income populations still face disparities regarding health and access to parks.ⁱⁱⁱ Eighteen percent of the US Gross Domestic Product goes to health care costs.^{iv} Forty-nine percent of American adults report that they do not engage in the Surgeon General’s recommended 30 minutes of physical activity for most days of the week; and 24 percent report having not engaged in any physical activity within the last 30 days.^{v, vi, vii, viii} According to the US Department of Agriculture’s Healthy Eating Index, only 12 percent of American households have good diets that emphasize fruits, vegetables, lean meats, whole grains, and low-fat dairy foods.^{ix, x} In regard to obesity, 36 percent of black and 35 percent of Hispanic high school students nationwide are overweight or obese, while 24 percent of non-Hispanic white high school students suffer from these conditions.^{xi}

Health and Sustainability

Even in the face of these statistics, the advent of the Healthy Parks Healthy People movement over the past decade has spurred a renewed appreciation of the health benefits of parks to society, within a deeper context of sustainability. As a society, we are just beginning to focus on the fact that the health of the environment, the health of our parks, and human health are interconnected; each cannot thrive without the others.

A Healthy Parks Healthy People global summit, convened in Australia in 2010, brought together 1200 participants from 37 nations and promulgated a holistic approach to the value of parks and protected areas in promoting health and well-being across four major themes: 1) Healthy Communities: social connections, cultural connections, building neighborhoods, economic development, and tourism; 2) Healthy Parks: caring for the environment, sustainability, effective management of parks, designing and creating healthy parks for people; 3) Healthy Participation: encouraging participation by people of diverse backgrounds, different demographics, facilities, programs and services, education, and life-long learning; 4) Healthy People: mental health, physical health, wellness.^{xii}

A growing body of evidence asserts that individual and societal health are inextricably linked to the health of people and the environment. Studies are increasingly suggesting unique benefits to getting outside and being active. When outside, people tend to exercise longer and in a freer, more vigorous way. Natural light is known for its therapeutic effects, and research suggests being outdoors can have positive effects on everything from stress to attention disorders to rates of healing to social cohesion and lower crime rates.^{xiii, xiv}

“...the health of the environment, the health of our parks, and human health are interconnected.”



US FOREST SERVICE / DARLA LENZ



NPS, GATEWAY NATIONAL RECREATION AREA

Healthy Parks Healthy People US Meeting, 2011

On April 5–6, 2011, National Park Service Director Jon Jarvis hosted a Healthy Parks Healthy People US meeting at the Golden Gate National Recreation Area in San Francisco. The purpose of this meeting was to explore the role of the NPS in promoting health and to strengthen partnership.

Approximately 90 people representing an array of sectors and interests met over the course of two days to address these questions:

- 1 How can national, state, and local parks combine forces with business innovators, healthcare leaders, scientists, and advocacy organizations to promote wellness and reduce healthcare costs?
- 2 How can we influence a cultural shift to value parks for health? What can community leaders and managers learn from experts and visionaries to make this a sustainable idea that affects behavior at its core?
- 3 How is human health dependent on the health of all species and the planet we share, and in what ways can parks and open spaces strengthen these connections?

The dialogue at this meeting was compelling and inspirational. A wealth of insights, strategies, and suggestions to strengthen the nexus of public lands and public health were shared, and an inspirational message was presented, which has subsequently been revised and adapted as an “Ethos of Public Lands and Public Health” (see next page).

A meeting summary, agenda, and list of attendees can be found at the NPS Healthy Parks Healthy People US website, www.nps.gov/public_health/hp/welcome.htm. This Healthy Parks Healthy People US Strategic Action Plan draws a vision and blueprint for the National Park Service to join in the Healthy Parks Healthy People movement. This vision and action plan supports our mission.

NPS Mission Statement

“The National Park Service preserves unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the national park system for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations. The Park Service cooperates with partners to extend the benefits of natural and cultural resource conservation and outdoor recreation throughout this country and the world.”

NPS Director Stanton and the National Leadership Council, 1997

An Ethos of Public Lands and Public Health

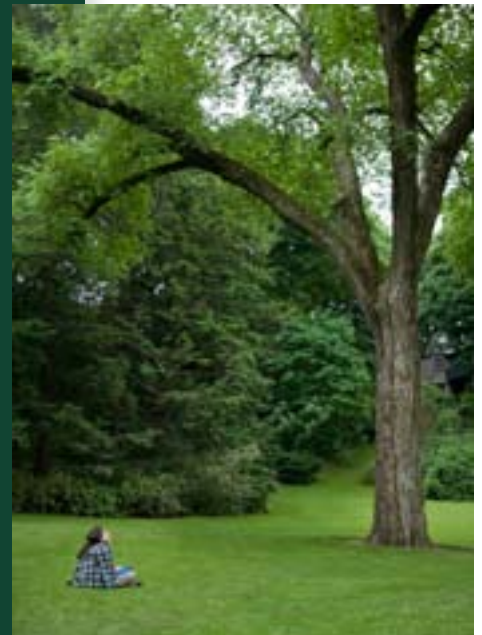
As champions of people's health and of our local, state, and national park system, we've come together to affirm our shared belief in the power of nature to improve the lives and well-being of all Americans.

We believe, as fellow humans, that people have a right, a duty, and a responsibility to interact with the world. We believe that doing so makes us all healthier, happier, and better custodians of our planet.

We believe, as Americans, that it's time to look critically at the health of our nation—and bring back the simple, fun, and absolutely vital practice of spending time outdoors to encourage personal health, forge community, and sustain humanity.

We see a future in which government, private, and not-for-profit leaders partner to create new value for our parks, for a new era in American history.

...A future in which our country is stronger for being led, inhabited, and loved by strong, healthy Americans.



NPS, OLIMSTED NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE / JOEL VEAK



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Strategic Framework

“We, who *promote* the outdoors as an indispensable element of our well-being, also must stress that the *outdoors* must be healthy as well.”

NPS Director Jon Jarvis
April 6, 2011

Our Vision

The National Park Service vision for the next century is for park lands to take their rightful place in creating a healthy and civil society. Toward that end, Healthy Parks Healthy People US will contribute to a sustainable world founded on promoting health and well-being of all species and the planet we share.

Guiding Principles

As we seek to define our role linking public health and the outdoors, the National Park Service Healthy Parks Healthy People US approach relies on the World Health Organization’s definition of health as “the complete state of physical, mental, and social well-being, not just the mere absence of disease” and subscribes to the following seven guiding principles.

7 Guiding Principles

- 1 We promote health and well-being as an interrelated system linking human health to natural landscapes and all species;
- 2 We seek expertise and resources from a wide range of partners in the public and private sectors;
- 3 Our aim includes activities that contribute to physical, mental, and spiritual health, and social well-being;
- 4 Our work takes place both within and beyond park boundaries;
- 5 We encourage uses that promote the health of all species while avoiding those that impair resources;
- 6 We seek to provide equitable access to open spaces and natural places;
- 7 Our commitment to improving public health will be mirrored in internal programs for our workforce.



Action Plan Strategy

The Strategic Action Plan for NPS Healthy Parks Healthy People US provides for creative exploration of health and well-being, within the context of sustainability, across four priority focus areas: 1) Demonstration Projects–Nodes of Innovation; 2) Research and Evaluation; 3) Communications and Education, and; 4) Alignment and Synergy (see figure below).

This strategic framework recognizes that our parks and public lands are a major untapped source of health and well-being. As a community, we need to promote and market parks and public lands for their deeper societal values, which can be expressed as social, environmental, and economic benefits.



NPS, OLIMSTED NATIONAL HISTORIC
SITE / JOEL VEAK

Strategic Action Plan

5-Year Action Plan

“Together, we
can *strengthen*
a common
well-being.”

National Park Service Health
and Wellness Executive Steering
Committee, 2011

The National Park Service will officially encourage, nurture, and support new approaches and innovations that promote the connection between public lands and public health. Our strategic plan is fueled by four catalyzing elements, organized around four priority focus areas (The 4x4 5-Year Action Plan).

Healthy Parks Healthy People US 4x4 5-Year Action Plan



4 Catalyzing Elements

- 1** Empowering staff to explore new ideas and approaches
- 2** Connecting innovators nationally and internationally, with each other and with potential partners
- 3** Supporting projects in priority focus areas through seed grants and technical assistance
- 4** Recognizing and illuminating successful ideas, innovations, and innovators

4 Focus Areas

- 1** Demonstration Projects—Nodes of Innovation
- 2** Research and Evaluation
- 3** Communications and Education
- 4** Alignment and Synergy



1

Demonstration Projects–Nodes of Innovation

The National Park Service will establish a Healthy Parks Healthy People approach that builds on nodes of innovation that emanate from experiments in the field and scientific information. Focusing first on specific nodes of innovation will provide a solid foundation for establishing a Healthy Parks Healthy People community of practice that can lead to growth, expansion, and sustainability.

Establish a Healthy Parks Healthy People–Nodes of Innovation Network

A network of Healthy Parks Healthy People practitioners across parks, programs, and divisions will be connected to each other and to partners, to support the establishment of interdisciplinary teams who can best deliver on successful health promotion programs at local, regional, and national levels. Much of the National Park Service health promotion activities to date have focused on physical activity (e.g. Park Prescriptions, building new trails, interpretive walks with rangers). Recognizing that the contribution of parks to health is much broader than just physical activity, early efforts will be encouraged to explore other areas as well (e.g. healthy foods, mental and spiritual health, healthy infrastructure/built environments, employee wellness, and One Health—a concept that recognizes that animal, human, and ecosystem health are inextricably linked and should be addressed as one).^{xv}

Priority will be given to new ideas aligned with our guiding principles (see **Strategic Framework**), have commitment from partners in the medical or public health community, and are measurable.



Improve Access To Parks

Parks are ideal living laboratories to demonstrate how open spaces can contribute to health on an ongoing and routine basis and how access to parks can be optimized for visitors and local residents. A common misperception is that national parks are destinations where people vacation and visit occasionally. Although this is true for some national parks, many National Park System units are located in or near urban areas and large population centers. All National Park System units—urban or wildland—can be cornerstones of health for visitors, employees, and neighboring communities. Additionally, access to parks can be enhanced and improved at the local, state, regional, and national level through ongoing National Park Service funded programs (i.e., Land and Water Conservation Fund; Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program; National Register of Historic Places Program; National Heritage Areas; and intermodal transportation projects that connect parks to communities).

“...open *spaces* can contribute to *health*...”



NPS, BISCAYNE NATIONAL PARK / THOMAS STROM

Demonstration Projects–Nodes of Innovation, continued

An emphasis will be placed on improving access to public lands for populations who use parks infrequently (e.g. minorities, low income community residents) and other priority populations (e.g. youth, seniors).

Education and interpretive programs will be developed that improve social cohesion and foster community by sharing the stories of the role of parks in promoting public health. Such stories will include parks as sources of hope, healing, social cohesion, social change, civic progress; and parks as sanctuaries for biodiversity and community resilience.

Examples of Demonstration Projects–Nodes of Innovation, 5-Year Action Items and Deliverables:

- Establish partnerships with healthcare providers and health insurers to promote parks and outdoor spaces as a vital component to healthy living;
- Develop and implement the National Park Service Healthy Foods strategy;
- Conduct a stealth health “X-Prize” design competition integrated with the National Park Service Designing the Parks program;
- Collaborate with the National Environmental Education Foundation to support and participate in their Children and Nature, Nature Champions Initiative;
- Expand on Tu Parque Tu Salud (Your Park, Your Health) pilot programs with the American Heart Association to promote healthy living in diverse, urban populations;

Continued on next page



Examples of Demonstration Projects–Nodes of Innovation, continued

- Develop a Let's Move Outside Junior Ranger tool-kit with a menu of program ideas and suggestions for application in the field;
- Establish a Healthy Parks Healthy People US micro-grants program;
- Implement RTCA-led healthy communities programs in ten to twelve urban portals across the country in partnership with the National Association of Community Health Centers and in collaboration with Let's Move Outside and Let's Move Cities and Towns;
- Expand Safe Adventures programs and health messaging in parks for visitors;
- Incorporate messaging on the health benefits of wilderness, especially in 2014, which marks the 50th anniversary of the Wilderness Act.
- Share information on innovative approaches for park-based employee work-site wellness programs.
- Substantially improve park access to disadvantaged youth and families in urban settings so they can experience the health benefits of parks.
- Issue a Healthy Parks Healthy People US call for proposals to identify new ideas and approaches for health promotion, and support philanthropic donations of money, time, expertise, and services;
- Pursue new pioneering efforts, not yet even imagined, with partners.



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2

Research and Evaluation

As the Healthy Parks Healthy People movement progresses, it is critical that programs and interventions are accompanied with a solid research and monitoring program to assess whether and to what extent these activities have a measurable and desired impact on health. Although a growing body of evidence shows the benefits of parks and their natural and cultural ecosystems on health, few studies have been conducted in national parks or other state/federal public lands. Studies should look at parks as integrated landscapes with natural and cultural resources that inspire visitation, movement, relaxation, healthy lifestyle behavior, and a sense of connection essential to health and well-being.

Establish Baselines

As an initial step, the National Park Service will commission baseline studies to understand how National Park Service units are currently being used for health promotion activities as well as understanding barriers and facilitators to park use by minority and low income populations. These studies may include observational assessments of urban parks and their users, an inventory of existing National Park Service programs, an evaluation of the built and natural environment in national parks, and the factors that encourage or discourage use by visitors and employees to improve health. In addition, the development of appropriate evaluation metrics and tools to monitor progress and



program effectiveness is essential. These baseline assessments will objectively describe the current state of the National Park Service and can also be used to track and measure future progress.

Publish and Implement a NPS Healthy Parks Healthy People Research Plan

Early in 2012, the National Park Service will convene a meeting of 20–30 leading researchers in health, nutrition, parks, and mental health to develop a short- and long-term Healthy Parks Healthy People research plan. This plan will be developed with a consortium of partners representing universities, prevention research centers, foundations, industry, and appropriate federal partners such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Examples of Research and Evaluation, 5-Year Action Items and Deliverables:

- Publish and implement a research plan;
- Develop a business case for health promotion in parks;
- Incorporate Healthy Parks Healthy People into the National Park Service Science Agenda;
- Reprogram existing funds and seek new funding to carry out baseline data acquisition and research;
- Launch a Healthy Parks Healthy People research community;
- Establish baseline data and evaluation metrics and tools to monitor progress in promoting healthy foods, healthy recreation, healthy park environments, and providing access to special populations;
- Disseminate research findings broadly, including the George Wright Society Biennial Conference in 2013.



NPS, OLMSTED NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE / JOEL VEAK

3

Communications and Education

The vision, guiding principles, and action plan for Healthy Parks Healthy People US must be effectively communicated to visitors and employees, partners, and other interested agencies and organizations.

Develop and Launch the NPS Healthy Parks Healthy People US Web Portal

Communication efforts are critical for both internal and external audiences. Internal communications will encourage all National Park Service employees to be ambassadors for healthy living and will emphasize that the link between public health and the outdoors has always been a part of the enjoyment, inspiration, education, and protection aspects of the National Park Service mission. For visitors, the initiative will provide numerous opportunities to educate the public on how parks play central roles in preserving and improving the health of humans—and of all species and our environment. A communications plan and activities will be developed for diverse and culturally relevant educational formats, including web pages, social networking sites, brochures, and ranger-led programs.

Use Fun, Creative, and Culturally Relevant Messaging

Messaging related to Healthy Parks Healthy People should emphasize the fun of health promotion and parks. Public lands will never be the sole source of health information for the public, but parks can reinforce messages on healthy living in fun and unique environments for learning. Effective communication that educates and inspires youth can also enhance the relevancy of national parks for America's next generations.



NPS, OLMSTED NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE / JOEL VEAK

Examples of Communications and Education, 5-Year Action Items and Deliverables:

- Issue a message to all National Park Service employees from the Director encouraging ideas, projects and exploration;
- Encourage and support all National Park Service employees to be ambassadors for healthy living;
- Establish a National Park Service National Health Council;
- Develop and launch a National Park Service Healthy Parks Healthy People US web portal;
- Develop Healthy Parks Healthy People interpretive themes and stories that can either be woven into existing interpretation or form the basis of new programs and exhibits;
- Develop a Healthy Parks Healthy People US unigrid brochure;
- Provide adaptable health promotion templates, tools, resources, and support for partners and staff;
- Develop unified health communications and branding with a theme and evidence-based messaging.



NPS, BISCAYNE NATIONAL PARK / THOMAS STROM

4

Alignment and Synergy

The Healthy Parks Healthy People US approach is not a new initiative per se, but rather a global movement founded on the convergence of actions and responsiveness of this generation to create a sustainable world. A quiet, powerful convergence of pioneering efforts has been gaining strength over the last 7–10 years, and it is time for the National Park Service to recognize and illuminate the role of parks and public lands in contributing to the health of people and the environment in a concerted way.

Build Partnerships and Leverage Resources

The contributions of Healthy Parks Healthy People US can best be realized by combining forces across a broad array of sectors and interests, both within and outside the organization. The National Park Service will build on the synergistic effect of ongoing health promotion initiatives, including Let's Move!, America's Great Outdoors, the National Prevention Strategy, and the National Physical Activity Plan. Partnerships will include national, state, regional, and local public lands agencies.

The National Park Service will pursue partnerships with federal agencies, corporations, healthcare providers and insurers, civic organizations, community-based organizations, health foundations, international organizations, and others. These partners are important sources for funding and resources, and also for enthusiasm, inspiration, imagination, practical ideas, and collaboration. For example, health and medical care providers and insurers already promote healthy lifestyles (i.e., healthy diet, physical activity, stress relief, and making environmental and social connections). These partners may also fund changes to the built environment to promote healthy park visits and access to parks, provide “park prescriptions” (patient referrals to local parks and trails), support research, and provide internship and fellowship opportunities in parks.



Foster Organizational Alignment

The National Park Service will implement a set of decisive actions empowering staff to work across institutional boundaries and divisions in support of the Healthy Parks Healthy People US collaborative approach. These actions will include structural changes and policy changes.

Examples of Alignment and Synergy, 5-Year Action Items and Deliverables:

- Join and contribute to national plans and strategies including:
 - Healthy People 2020
 - National Physical Activity Plan
 - National Prevention Strategy
 - National Collaborative on Childhood Obesity Research
 - Bipartisan Policy Center's Healthy Living Initiative
 - Let's Move Outside
 - One Health
 - America's Great Outdoors
 - NPS Call to Action
 - NPS Center for Innovation and Creativity
 - NPS Cultural Resources Challenge
 - NPS The Leopold Report Revisited

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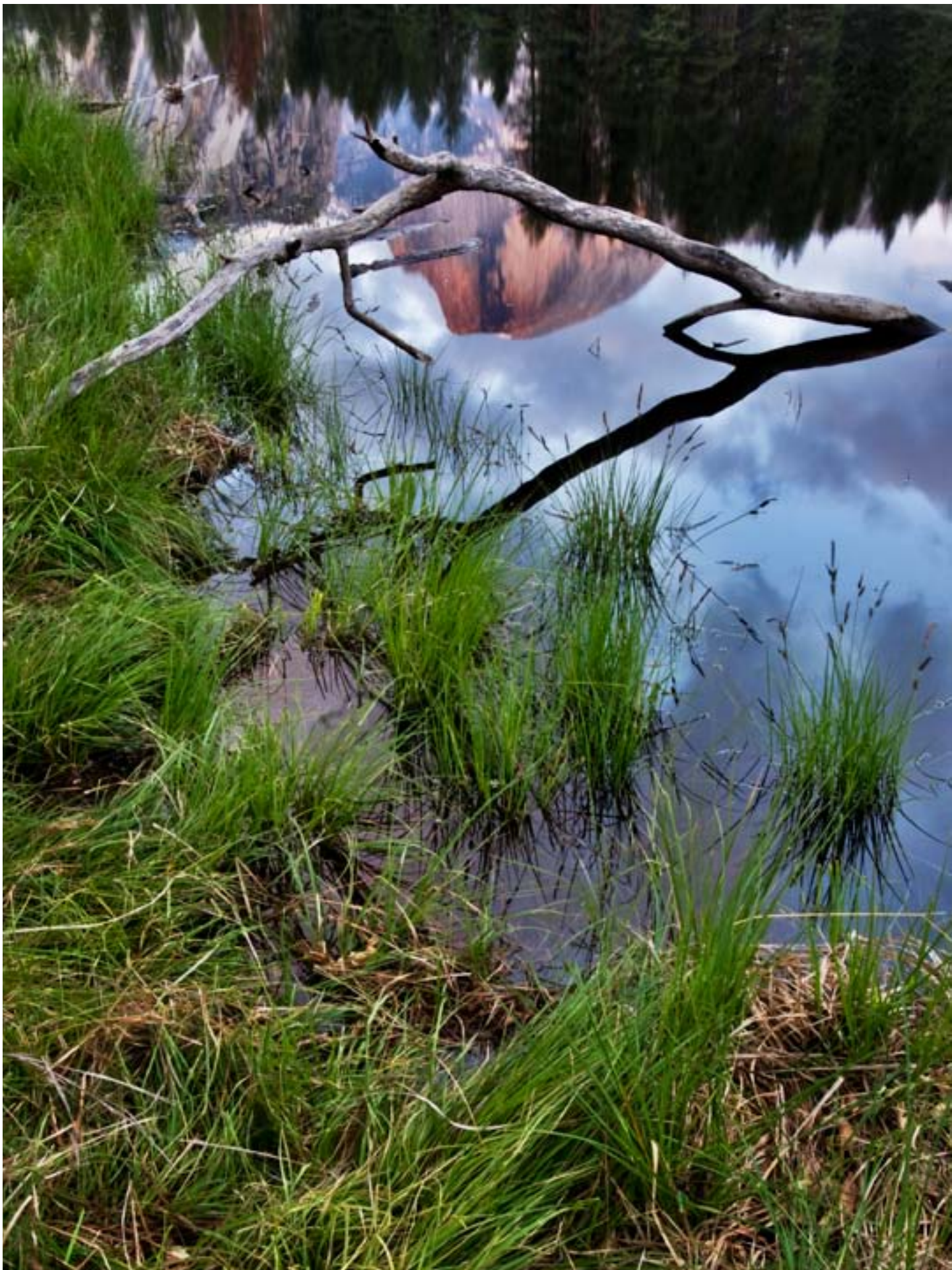


Examples of Alignment and Synergy, continued

- Provide an online registry for agencies and organizations to adopt the Ethos of Public Lands and Public Health;
- Coordinate health promotion cross-marketing and communications with federal agencies;
- Host a Healthy Parks Healthy People International Congress and Expo in early 2014;
- Review, promulgate, and align National Park Service policies to encourage and empower staff to readily assimilate a Healthy Parks Healthy People US approach into day-to-day operations;
- Provide a permanent home for Healthy Parks Healthy People US within the National Park Service Office of Public Health;
- Create a National Park Service Office of One Health by merging the Office of Public Health and the Wildlife Health Program;
- Support temporary assignments for employees to work on Healthy Parks Healthy People US activities that facilitate interdisciplinary collaborations across parks, programs, and communities;
- Reward staff for pursuing collaborative approaches to meeting Healthy Parks Healthy People US goals through staff recognition and awards.



NPS, SITKA NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK



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- »Chez Panisse Restaurant
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- »Parks Victoria
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- »Public Health Law and Policy
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- »Revolution Foods
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- »SeeChange Health
- »Sierra Club
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